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ABSTRACT

This paper questions who should fund and control teacher centers. Recommendations include the establishment of local teacher centers supervised by a board of trustees chosen jointly by the teachers' union and the school superintendent and funded by the board of education in an amount equal to at least 2% of the annual operating budget. The author suggests that teachers demand teacher centers during collective bargaining, which would contribute to the professionalism of teaching and make the teacher center concept operational rather than experimental. (PD)

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TEACHERS CENTERS: WHO SHOULD PAY AND WHO SHOULD CONTROL?

David Selden

Over the past three years I have attended a great many conferences built around exploration of the teacher center concept. The idea seems to be catching on but there are almost as many models as there are centers. Furthermore, many projects which are called teacher centers are nothing of the sort. Many are merely an extension of the local curriculum division.

The teacher center as it was conceived and instituted in England is still the best working model we have. British teacher centers are really teacher centers. They are controlled by teachers. They do improve the quality of instruction. They enhance teacher professionalism and they often are teacher social centers. Very few of the projects called teacher centers in America meet any of these objectives and I have not found a single project which comes close to fulfilling all of them.

This is not to say that what are called teacher centers in this country are not good and worthwhile projects. Most of them are, in fact. It is just that these projects tend to be bureaucratic responses to a new idea. Someone in the administrative hierarchy, with the best intentions in the world, picks up the teacher center concept and imposes it on the existing framework. Very few of them enlist any great amount of teacher involvement. Most tend to cater to a comparatively small clientele. Even worse, some function on a more or less compulsory basis through the administrative structure of the system.

The basic idea of the teacher center is that teachers--perhaps only teachers--can improve the quality of education if they are properly motivated and

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are given responsibility for making such improvements. It is self-evident, then, that a teacher center which suddenly appears by administrative fiat will be viewed with suspicion and cynicism by most teachers. The impact of such a center will be minimal.

The Purse Strings

A proper teacher center cannot be run on a shoestring, but this appears to be what is being attempted in some places. There is a teacher center which has a total budget of $40,000 and the services of one teacher three days a week. I am sure that this project is valuable but it is not a teacher center in any sense of the word. It does have an essential component, however: the $40,000 is an integral part of the local school budget.

The question of finance is crucial to the spread of the teacher center concept. When I first became interested in the centers, I thought that they should be financed by the federal government. But I have come to believe intensely that this should not be the case. I am appreciative of the fact that federal officials in the United States Office of Education have been almost entirely responsible for keeping the movement alive. But OE does not have funds to establish teacher centers in all localities and, if it did, the centers would be suffocated in red tape.

Many of the present centers have been set up with assistance of foundation funds. They tend to be a little freer, apparently, than the federal models, but they are all demonstration projects. Foundation funding cannot be regarded as a permanent way to pay for the centers.

Some years ago, I proposed that two percent of every local school district budget be set aside for research and development, and that such R&D be

carried out under the joint control of teachers and their school managements. I still think this is a good idea and it combines nicely with the teacher center idea. It will never happen, however, unless teacher organizations become more interested in it than they are at present--and that includes the organization of which I am President.

Negotiating for Professionalism

Local bargaining agents should include as a standard demand on their collective bargaining shopping lists "establishing a teacher center under the supervision of a board of trustees chosen jointly by the union and the school superintendent and financed by the board of education in an amount equal to at least two percent of the annual operating budget." Such a demand would not be unattainable. The budget for a school district with a thousand teachers might run somewhere around $15 million. Two percent of that would be $300,000, and that seems to me to be about right for operating a proper teacher center to serve a thousand teachers. There is ample precedent for joint union-management bodies in other areas of collective bargaining. Welfare funds are normally supervised by boards of trustees chosen jointly by the union and by management, for instance.

The impact of putting the teacher center idea into the collective bargaining process would be far reaching. It would be the biggest step teachers have taken thus far towards professionalism. It would be an acknowledgement by both management and teachers that the quality of education is a legitimate collective concern for teachers and not reserved exclusively for people who no longer teach. Furthermore, putting the teacher center into the bargaining process would immediately take the concept out of the experimental stage and make it operational. As such, it would closely approximate the British model and it may even be that we could put in some beneficial new ideas.

First Things First

The teacher center idea is not quite as simple as it appears at first glance. Some college and university people are afraid that the centers would cut into their inservice and higher degree credit-point business. This might happen but I doubt it. It is true that one of the chief purposes assigned to the centers is the revitalization of inservice education, but there would be nothing to prevent a center from contracting with a local university or college for courses, seminars, and other services. Incidentally, how come no university or college has set up a teacher center of its own?

Another point of controversy sometimes injected into the teacher center discussions is the question of teacher evaluation. While I have been saying for many years that evaluation should be taken out of the hands of administrators and supervisors, I am not sure that that function should be given over to a teacher center, at least if the present meaning of teacher evaluation is retained. Teacher centers should be progressive and friendly places. They should steer clear of judgmental activities.

By and large, I have confidence that once a school board somewhere accedes to the demand by a teacher bargaining agent that a teacher center be established, that the teachers will find a way to make it work. And I am equally certain that the teachers will put first things first; that is, finding new ways to solve the everyday problems that teachers must confront. Once the first negotiated teacher center is in operation, it is very likely that teacher centers will become a national movement just as they did in Britain, and when that happens it will be a happy day for American education.